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Committee Representation in the European Parliament

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ABSTRACT

The European Parliament (EP) possesses a highly specialized committee system, operating in a complex institutional and political environment, yet little empirical work has investigated how MEPs are assigned to EP committees and what consequences this process has for representation and policy-making. In this article I examine the growth of EP committees and committee membership since 1979, and address the question of whether these committees are representative of the EP as a whole. Using an original data set of committee membership, national and EP party affiliation, MEP characteristics, and MEP policy preferences derived from roll-call votes, I address three key questions: Does committee membership reflect the party group composition of the EP? Do committee members possess specialized expertise in their committees' policy areas? And, finally, do committee members' general or committee-specific policy preferences differ substantially from those of the overall Parliament? The results suggest very strongly that, although committee members do tend to possess policy-specific expertise, committees are, nonetheless, highly representative of the EP as a whole, in terms of both party and policy representation.

KEY WORDS

- committees
- European Parliament
- preference outliers

In the early years of the Parliament there was the institutional imperative but now many of these demands have been met. . . . The debate is [now] less institutional and much more about policy content. . . . The institutional agenda has been achieved, policy matters much more. It is an entirely new environment since Maastricht and now it is much more of an issue if a committee is off-centre. (Former MEP, George Ben Patterson)¹

Introduction

Committees form the backbone of most modern legislatures, screening, drafting, amending and even, in some cases, approving legislation. The question of how committee systems form and how parties fill them with members has great importance for the process of policy-making and passing laws (Shepsle, 1978; Mattson and Strøm, 1995; Longley and Davidson, 1998). Parliaments are often large and unwieldy bodies and increasingly function effectively only by delegating important policy-making tasks to specialized committees. Consequently, the subject of how committee specialization occurs and how committee members are chosen has generated a huge volume of academic study (Groseclose, 1994; Krehbiel, 1991; Londregan and Snyder, 1994). A key question in committee studies is whether committees are representative of the legislatures they serve. Despite the clear advantages that division of labour and gains from specialization bring to an assembly, there are risks involved in this delegation process. Committees may not always act in the interest of the chamber, especially if they consist of unrepresentative samples of legislators. Not only might appointed committees become dominated by partisan interests, but they might also consist of specialists whose policy concerns do not reflect those of the democratically elected legislature.

Previous studies of committee selection have primarily focused on the US Congress (Fenno, 1973; Smith and Deering, 1984; Weingast and Moran, 1983), although the question has also been recently examined in a number of US state legislatures (Overby et al., 2004), the German Bundesrat (Alter, 2002) and the Brazilian Camara dos Deputados (Santos, 2002). In this paper, I examine committee representation in the European Parliament (EP), a legislature whose committee system has steadily grown in diversity and importance over the course of the past three decades. With 732 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) working in 20 official languages, the vast bulk of the work of the EP falls to its system of 20 specialized committees. Most of the activity of MEPs is concentrated in parliamentary committees, not in the debating chamber. As is the case with the United States Congress, the European Parliament in committee is the European Parliament at work.

Despite the important role played by these committees, however, little systematic work has been done investigating their overall composition. In 1995, Bowler and Farrell examined various demographic and background characteristics of the MEPs who occupied committee positions, but they did not look at any specific policy measures of committee composition. Furthermore, their analysis was confined to the pre-Maastricht period, before the Parliament became fully legislative. More recent work by Whitaker (2005) explored the voting behaviour of 12 committee contingents vis-à-vis their national party delegations, and Kaeding (2004) and Hoyland (2006) have examined the representative nature of the report allocation process. Nonetheless, a full systematic exploration of the nature and role of EP committees has yet to be undertaken.

In this article I examine three important issues concerning committees in the EP. First, I examine from an empirical standpoint whether EP committees are representative of the party group composition of the EP as a whole. Not only has this question never before been examined in the EP, but it has also seldom been examined in any multi-party context. From a substantive European perspective, this investigation also queries whether the EP has adhered to its Rules of Procedure, which dictate that 'the composition of the committees shall as far as possible reflect the composition of Parliament' (European Parliament, 2004: 177.1). Second, extending the work of Bowler and Farrell (1995), I investigate the characteristics of individual MEPs to determine whether committee members are more likely than other members to have specialized expertise related to their committee assignments. I also include measures of MEP ideology to test whether such specialization necessarily entails ideological bias. If committees are composed of MEPs with specialist knowledge in a given area this might indicate an unrepresentative committee in terms of ideological formation, though equally it could simply indicate the exploitation of policy expertise by parties as an informational asset. Finally, I compare the distribution of policy preferences of committees with that of the EP as a whole, testing whether committees are representative not just numerically but also ideologically. The conventional wisdom among members is that the committees are not ideologically representative of the parent chamber. In this paper I examine the legitimacy of this belief. This involves comparing committee and legislative median positions using Monte Carlo simulations.

The findings suggest that, by and large, the EP committee system is indeed representative of the Parliament as a whole. Not only is partisan balance in committees generally proportional to party group share in the EP, but committee seats are also proportional within countries. This proportionality is maintained despite the fact that committees also tend to be filled by MEPs with specialized knowledge. Despite their relatively specialized knowledge,

however, committee members do not tend to be significantly different from the overall legislature in their policy views, either on a general left–right dimension or in their specific policy domains.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section briefly describes the principal features of the EP committee system, situating it in the context of major existing theories of legislative committee functions. The third section presents some exploratory analysis of committee assignments in terms of party and national representation. The fourth section examines the background characteristics of MEPs who end up on particular committees. The fifth section describes the data and methods for testing the extent of outlying committees and presents the empirical results. Finally, the paper discusses the results and suggests directions for future research.

The committee system of the European Parliament

Committees have played a central role in the EP from the outset. The Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community, the antecedent of the modern Parliament, recognized that committees would help alleviate the problems inherent in coordinating work in an assembly that was scheduled to meet in plenary only a handful of times a year. To this end, in January 1953 it created seven committees to conduct Assembly business. But it was in the immediate aftermath of the first direct elections in 1979 that the committee system was significantly expanded and developed as the locus of MEP activity. Figure 1 graphically displays the expansion of the committee system since 1979. At the same time as the membership of the Parliament expanded from 200 to 410 members, the number of standing committees was expanded from 12 to 15. Two further committees were added in 1981 and one more each in 1987, 1992 and 1994. By the start of the sixth parliamentary period (July 2004) a total of 20 standing committees were in place.² Most MEPs – 562 of the 626 MEPs (90%) in the 1999 session – were full members on only one committee, although some MEPs served on more than one. The average number of committee assignments rose slightly between 1979 and 1994 (Figure 1), and there are signs of another slight increase in the newly enlarged sixth Parliament (full details are provided in Appendix A).³ An MEP's second committee assignment is almost always on a 'neutral committee'. Neutral committees include Women's Rights, Fisheries and Petitions and tend to be weak, non-legislative committees. They are considered neutral because membership does not come at the cost of a position on another committee.

Figure 1 also demonstrates that the *size* of committees has increased over the past 25 years. Average committee size has risen from 31 to 43 members,

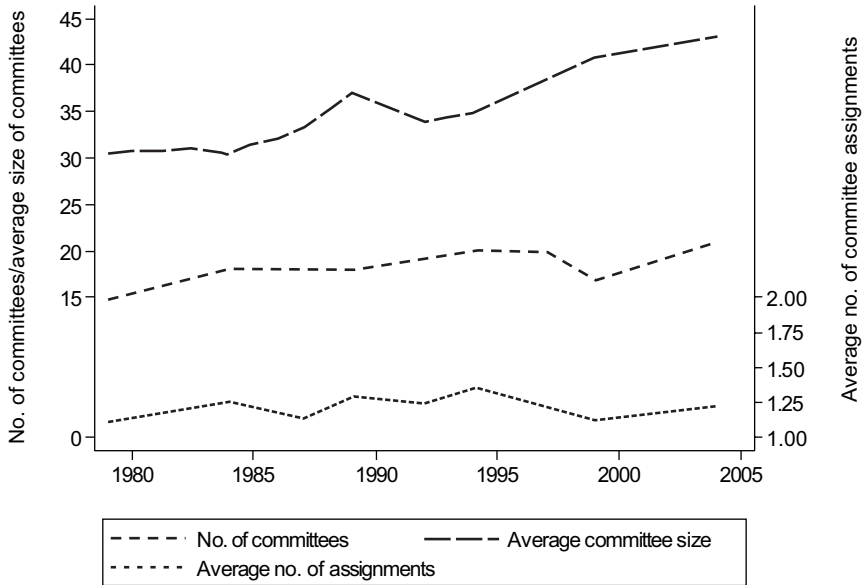


Figure 1 Committee expansion in the European Parliament, 1979–2004.

although sizes vary significantly across committees within the same legislative session. For instance, the current (January 2006) Legal Affairs Committee is composed of a mere 25 members whereas the Foreign Affairs Committee has 78 affiliates.

The importance of the committee system is underscored by a recent survey of MEPs. When asked to choose their first preference from among the EP posts of Group President, EP President, National Delegation Leader or Committee Chair, more respondents opted for a committee chair rather than any of the alternatives.⁴ MEPs clearly value committee posts and believe that the committee system is a focal point of power that matters to the legislative process within the EP.

Theories of legislative organization suggest that committee systems are formed either to solve coordination problems among representatives by facilitating logrolling among members or to facilitate legislative efficiency (for an overview of this literature, see Kaeding, 2004). The former *distributional* approach predicts that members deliberately join committees in order to exercise disproportionate influence over the policy areas under the committee's jurisdiction. Committee members share a desire for high levels of benefit from the policies that lie within the jurisdiction of their committee (*high demand preference outliers*). This results in committees that may be very

unrepresentative of the legislature as a whole. The alternative *informational* approach argues that committees are created to provide a greater number of legislative arenas for policy development and output in legislatures that are overburdened. This efficiency is enhanced by members' specialization in particular policy sub-fields. Informational theorists (Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1990; Krehbiel, 1991) dispute the degree of autonomy that the distributional approach ascribes to committees, arguing that most legislation must pass a majority vote on the floor of the house in order to be enacted. It is argued that the incentives for the Parliament are to organize representative committees as reliable sources of information. If this informational view of committees prevails, we should not find committees that are composed of preference outliers or committees that are more homogeneous than the Parliament as a whole (Krehbiel, 1991: 123).

Given what we know about the origins of committees in the EP, the informational approach seems initially more plausible. Legislation in the European Union tends to be a complex, bargained outcome between multiple institutions. The Parliament has traditionally enjoyed fewer legislative powers than the European Council, and any informational advantages developed through committee expertise would clearly improve the bargaining power of the EP. Such specialization was particularly important in the early days of the Parliament when it acted as a mere consultative assembly. Informational advantages brought about by specialization were perhaps the only means by which it could challenge the legislative authority of the European Council. Finally, the lack of 'pork' (selective goods to offer as rewards to constituents) to distribute, coupled with the lack of strong constituency ties in European elections, removes many of the incentives that traditionally are seen to produce distributive gains. Together, these factors would lead us to expect to observe the main empirical implications of the informational approach, namely that committee membership will be highly representative of the legislature and that committee members will not consist of preference outliers.

Partisan representativeness

In order to examine the overall correspondence between party strength and committee representation in the EP, data from the last committee period in the Fifth Parliament 2002–4 are examined. This session was chosen as the most recent full legislative session.⁵ The data were compiled from the annual *Listes Grises* of the European Parliament (full details in Appendix B). The results for the two largest parties, the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the European People's Party (EPP), are presented in Figure 2. The horizontal

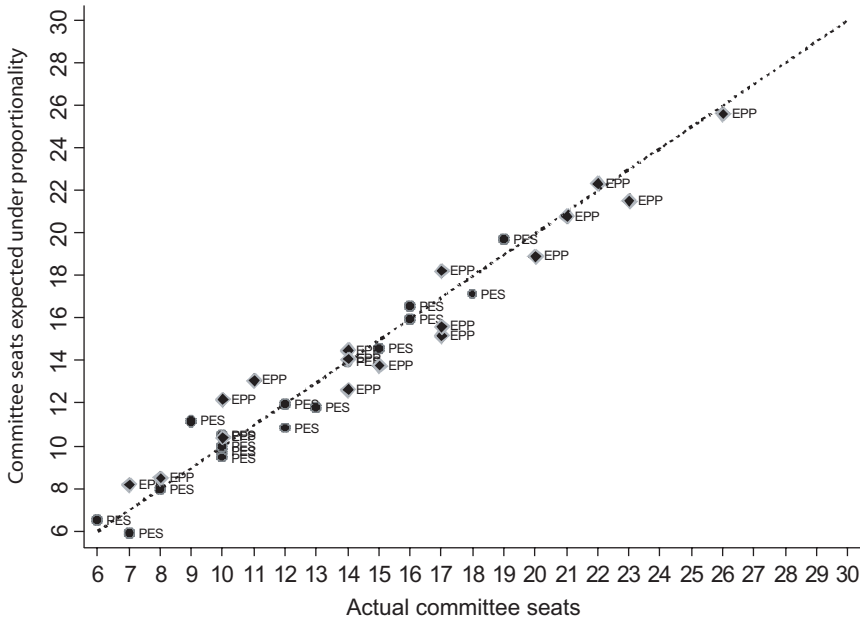


Figure 2 Committee seat proportionality for the PES and the EPP, 2002.

axis represents the number of actual seats held by these parties on each of the 17 standing committees of the Fifth Parliament, and the vertical axis is the number of seats one would expect if committee seats were allocated according to perfect numerical proportionality.

As is evident from this graphical representation, the proportion of party seats on committees very closely approximates partisan strength in the Parliament. A majority of committees lie within one seat of perfect proportionality (represented by the diagonal line). Only one committee has a PES seat majority or deficit of greater than one seat. The EPP also has a one-seat overrepresentation on only one committee, and it is underrepresented by more than one seat on two other committees. By and large, in terms of partisan representation there is a very close correspondence between the overall make-up of the chamber and the committees. Analysis of the remaining five parties in the EP at this time demonstrates similar results: parties are neither systematically underrepresented nor systematically overrepresented on committees.

Another issue related to proportionality concerns committee representation according to the size of national delegations. The EP Rules of Procedure do not stipulate that committee positions should also be assigned in proportion to national delegation strength. Nonetheless, as Figures 3 and 4

demonstrate, national proportionality does indeed seem to be the norm. Figures 3 and 4 represent the actual and expected number of German and UK members on the 17 standing committees for the EPP and PES in January 2002. These two delegations were chosen because they constituted the largest national delegations within both the PES and the EPP in the 2002–4 legislative session.

The results show a strong consistency between a strict proportionality rule and the actual national composition of committees. Again, a large majority of committee assignments lie within one seat of perfect proportionality. Within the EPP, the German members are underrepresented on two committees and overrepresented on two, and the UK members are overrepresented on just one committee. Within the PES, only the German delegation has a deviation from perfect proportionality larger than one seat, and this on only one committee. It would appear that, at least where party and geography are concerned, there is a concerted effort to ensure that the committees are microcosms of the Parliament as a whole. This evidence points to a strong tendency to consider both partisan and national proportionality issues when committee seats are assigned.

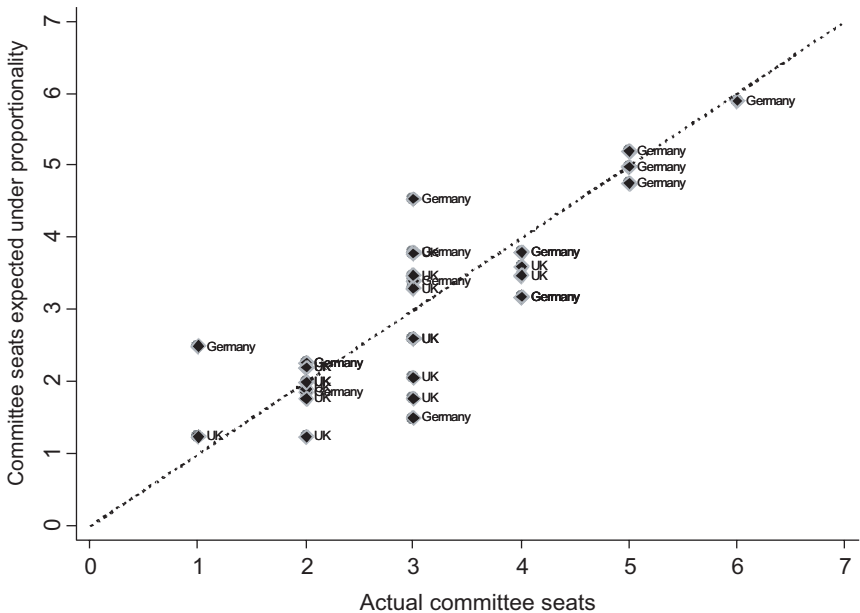


Figure 3 Committee seats by national delegation: EPP, 2002.

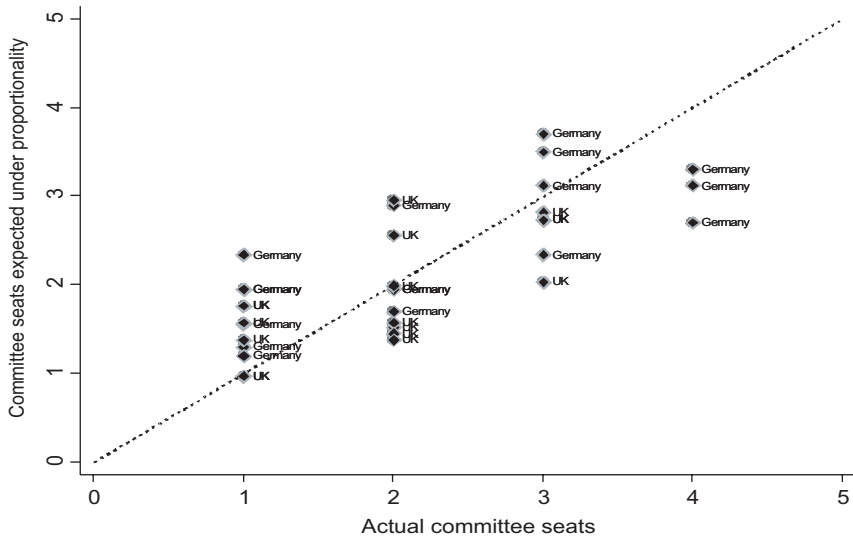


Figure 4 Committee seats by national delegation: PES, 2002.

Committee specialization

Although the evidence indicates strongly that deliberate efforts are made to ensure that committees are representative of legislative party seat shares, committee members may nonetheless possess expertise or personal interests that are not representative of the legislature as a whole. In other words, committees may consist of specialists in particular policy areas, causing committees to be more homogeneous than the Parliament as a whole. For instance, MEPs with ties to farming, working within the parameters established by the rules and norms of the EP, may be disproportionately assigned to the Agriculture Committee. This possibility in fact reflects a widely held belief among MEPs, expressed succinctly by a former vice-president of the Party of European Socialists:

Committees are definitely and regrettably not representative of the Parliament in plenary, they are not microcosms; this results in legislative distortion. The environmentally minded from all groups are on the Environment committee, giving it a distinctly green outlook; likewise there are too many farmers on Agriculture. The result of this specialization and lack of representativeness is that policy is not reflective of the majority view of the Parliament and we frequently have to spend hours in Parliament voting to correct the committee report and proposed legislation. (Personal interview)

Another Labour MEP similarly commented: 'The problem with the EP is that Agriculture is full of farmers, the Environment of greens, Legal Affairs of lawyers, Foreign Affairs of ex-ministers; we need a better balance on committees, not a bunch of specialists.' In this section I examine the evidence for this type of specialized committee membership.

Of course, finding evidence of specialization is not sufficient proof that committees are composed of outliers or high demanders, since such evidence is also consistent with the expectations of informational theories. It may be in the interest of party leaders and the Parliament as a legislative institution to appoint specialists to a committee. Interview evidence also suggests that this is not an inaccurate characterization of the assignment process. One junior member of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform (ELDR) group commented:

I was convinced by the party leadership to take a position on the Industry Committee because of my background. I was really not so inclined myself but they felt it would strengthen the bargaining position of the party as we have only got five members on this particular committee. (Personal interview)

On the other hand, if there is no evidence of specialization, this could indicate that the assignment process is either random or based on different criteria, such as wanting the committee to include members with a broad spectrum of experience, not just those with policy expertise in the field. Specialization may indicate that committees are composed of high demanders, in keeping with a distribution theory of committee systems, but equally it may simply indicate that parties actively and knowingly exploit the policy knowledge of their members for efficiency reasons. Essentially, it is difficult to interpret the full implications of finding or not finding policy experts on a committee.

Using data from the 1999–2004 legislature, I test the hypothesis that there is some degree of specialization in the actual assignment process for the two largest political groups, the European People's Party and the Party of the European Socialists. In contrast to Bowler and Farrell (1995), I analyse the political groups separately. This approach is superior because if the assignment process is largely in proportion to party strength – as demonstrated in the previous section – then statistical evidence of specialization may be attenuated if we include all parties in one equation. For instance, if there are no farmers in the ranks of the PES (as is largely the case) and they have to take the second-largest portion of seats on the Agriculture Committee, the absence of farmers from their ranks would indicate that there is less specialization than might be possible if they had farmers to choose from, whereas the EPP may actually put all its many farmers on this committee. In addition, the

assignment process need not necessarily work in the same fashion in each party.

The dependent variable is actual committee assignment at the beginning of the Fifth Parliament (July 1999). In particular, I examine the assignment process to the Legal Affairs Committee, the Environment and Public Health Committee, and the Committee on Industry, External Trade, Research and Energy (Industry). These three committees vary in their overall influence on policy. The Environment and Industry committees are two of the most powerful in the EP, whereas the Legal Affairs Committee is somewhat less prestigious. If there is specialization, we would expect members with a background in law to be attracted to the Legal Affairs Committee, and MEPs with links to environmental groups or medicine to be particularly attracted to the Environment Committee. Similarly, MEPs with links to big business and industry should be drawn to the Industry Committee. As control variables, I have included measures of the demographic and ideological characteristics policy experience and seniority of MEPs.

Information on the background characteristics of MEPs was culled from a variety of sources, including the *Times Guide to the European Parliament* (e.g. Morgan, 1994), *Handbook of the European People's Party (CD-Group) of the European Parliament* (European People's Party, 2001), *The Members of the European Parliament 1999–2004* (European Parliament, 2001) and the personal websites of MEPs.

MEP seniority is operationalized in two ways. The variable *Years Served* captures the concept of deference to long-serving members of the Parliament, and simply measures the number of years that the MEP has served in the EP.⁶ Slightly less than 55% of EPP members were freshmen in 1999, and only 7% of members had served more than 10 years. The comparable statistics for the PES are 43% and 11%. The second measure of seniority is *Committee Previously*, a dichotomous variable that measures whether the member served on this particular committee in the previous Parliament. Of returning EPP members, for instance, 67% served on the same committee that they had been on in the previous Parliament. The demographic variables include *Gender* and *Age*, which is measured in years. The median age for the EPP members was 52 years, and in the PES it was one year lower at 51. Slightly over one-third of PES members were women, compared with just over a quarter of EPP members.

The policy expertise variables vary for the committee under consideration. *Legal* captures whether the member was a lawyer, judge, law lecturer or former minister of justice at the national level. Almost 20% of EPP MEPs had some connection to the legal profession, compared with 13% of PES members. *Industry* is coded 1 if the member had ties to industry, was a trade

Table 1 Logistic regression of EPP and PES committee assignments, 1999

| Variable | EPP | | | PES | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| | Legal Affairs Committee | Environment & Public Health Committee | Industry Committee | Legal Affairs Committee | Environment & Public Health Committee | Industry Committee |
| Ideology | 1.51 (5.8) | -0.67 (2.02) | 1.01 (1.75) | 0.96 (1.74) | 1.10 (7.97) | 1.71 (6.5) |
| Years Served | -0.05 (0.06) | -0.37** (0.15) | -0.05 (0.08) | -0.03 (0.09) | -0.06 (0.09) | 0.04 (0.06) |
| Committee Previously | 3.09** (1.20) | 4.8** (2.67) | 4.94** (1.01) | 3.92** (1.34) | 4.70** (0.73) | 2.89** (0.84) |
| Age | -0.003 (0.02) | -0.005 (0.032) | 0.04 (0.03) | 0.01 (0.03) | -0.02 (0.03) | 0.03 (0.03) |
| Gender | -0.13 (0.56) | 1.45** (0.63) | -0.40 (0.72) | -0.89 (0.92) | 1.61* (0.74) | 0.34 (0.64) |
| Green Ties | | 1.86* (1.0) | | | 1.98* (1.1) | |
| Medicine | | 2.54** (0.84) | | | 3.47** (1.12) | |
| Industry | | | 0.71 (0.71) | | | 1.77** (0.68) |
| Legal | 1.42** (0.58) | | | 1.50** (0.60) | | |
| Constant | -1.35 (2.35) | -2.40 (2.14) | -3.95 (2.0) | -4.17* (2.18) | -3.46 (3.3) | -0.70 (2.8) |
| -2LL | 108.8 | 85.8 | 101.4 | 99.6 | 71.4 | 85.6 |
| N | 170 | 224 | 224 | 224 | 170 | 170 |

Data sources: EP: Medlemsfortegnelse over Praesidiet, Parlamentet, de Politiske Grupper og Udvalgene (1994, 1999); The Times Guide to the European Parliament (1994); Dod's European Companion (1999); Handbook of the European People's Party (2000).

Note: Figures in parentheses represent standard errors.

*significant at the 5% level; ** significant at the 10% level.

unionist, owned his or her own company or was a former minister of industry at the national level. In the EPP, 14% of members had ties to industry or labour. In the PES, a similar proportion (12%) had ties to industry, largely through trade unions. *Green Ties* is coded 1 if the member ever had ties to green groups such as Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace, or was a former minister of the environment at the national level. There were very few such ties in either party: fewer than 4% in either case. *Medical* is a dichotomous variable coded 1 if the member is or was in the medical profession or a former minister of health at the national level.

The final independent variable, *Ideology*, measures the MEPs' ideological preferences. This measure is taken from the standard first-dimension W-NOMINATE scores derived by Hix et al. (2005) for members in the Fifth Parliament, the only currently available measure of MEP ideological preferences. These scores measure the MEP left-right placement on a -1.0 to +1.0 scale, estimated from roll-call votes using techniques of multidimensional scaling (a more detailed discussion of the use of the NOMINATE scores is presented in the next section).

Table 1 displays logistic regression estimates of committee membership for the three committees under examination for both main political groups. A positive coefficient for an independent variable implies that changing the value of the independent variable from 0 to 1 increases the probability of obtaining an assignment on this committee (and obviously the reverse for negative coefficients). For example, a positive coefficient on *Medical* would mean that, holding all other values at their mean, members with a background in medicine are more likely to receive such an assignment.

A quick look at Table 1 confirms that the results are largely consistent with a specialization hypothesis. There are predictable patterns in the selection of MEPs onto committees. MEPs with a medical background or links to environmental groups are more likely to be on the Environment and Public Health Committee. Lawyers end up on the Legal Affairs Committee, just as those with links to industry end up on the Industry Committee. For each of the committees in question, occupational and interest groups ties are in the expected direction and, with the exception of the EPP delegation to the Industry Committee, all are statistically significant. In addition, previous tenure on a committee is highly significant for both parties for all of the three committees. In other words, both expertise and experience matter for the assignment of MEPs to committee positions. These results contrast with those of Bowler and Farrell (1995), indicating here that there is strong evidence in support of a seniority norm operating in the EP. These divergent findings may be a product of the different time period under consideration, since the EP is considerably more professionalized than it was even a decade ago. It may

also be a result of methodological choices in the modelling process, since analysing political groups separately makes a difference. Interestingly, for both political parties *Gender* is significant for the Environment and Public Health Committee: female MEPs are more likely to be assigned to this committee than are their male counterparts. *Ideology* is not significant for either of the parties for any of the committees under consideration. This result suggests that party representatives on a committee are not ideologically different from their co-partisans.⁷

There is thus clear evidence of specialization in the assignment process in the European Parliament. It is not possible to infer from these results, however, whether these patterns reflect a process of self-selection on the part of the members, or whether the party chooses to place policy specialists on the Legal Affairs, Environment and Industry committees. In other words, it is not clear if the assignment process is driven by the collective needs of the party for expertise or by self-selecting homogeneous high demanders. None of this actually speaks to whether or not the median policy preference on a committee is different from that of the floor. The next section directly explores this question by testing whether committees are representative of the full chamber in terms of their distribution of policy preferences.

Policy representativeness

Evidence of specialization cannot prove that a committee's members share a common policy outlook or commitment to high levels of benefits from policies within the jurisdiction of their particular committee. The precise nature of this committee–floor interaction is a topic that has long occupied scholars of Congress, and a voluminous literature is devoted to testing the degree to which committees are outlying in general left–right terms and, to a lesser extent, in their own policy jurisdictions. The work of Weingast and Marshall (1988) and Londregan and Snyder (1994) have found that the committees of the US Congress are predominantly unrepresentative in nature. However, these results have been hotly contested by Krehbiel (1991) and Groseclose (1994), amongst others. In this paper I extend this debate beyond the US case by exploring the floor–committee relationship in the EP. Using original data on committee assignments and members' ideal points, and using a variety of statistical techniques and Monte Carlo simulations, I test the degree to which committees are composed of preference outliers.

To test whether or not committees are composed of preference outliers, we need a measure of MEP preferences. Unfortunately, true preferences are inherently unobservable. Unlike the case of the US Congress, we have no

established independent interest group ratings for individual members of the EP.⁸ One must therefore use data on MEP behaviour to infer policy preferences. One such means of locating member preferences is to use their voting record in plenary. In this paper I use the W-NOMINATE (Poole and Rosenthal, 1991) procedure to locate members of the European Parliament in multidimensional Euclidean space. The NOMINATE procedure is essentially a scaling algorithm that was developed in the context of the US Congress and has been applied with considerable success in this arena. NOMINATE extracts n -common factors that characterize a multidimensional policy space and provides measures of the explanatory power of these factors. This method of estimation does not take into account either the political affiliation of the legislator or the nature of the vote.

The use of NOMINATE scores is not without problems, especially as not all votes in the European Parliament are subject to roll calls. In the last legislature, for instance, roll calls represented only about one-third of all votes (Hix, 2001: 667). Roll-call votes thus do not provide a complete picture of MEP voting behaviour. The decision to call a roll-call vote may be a strategic action. The political groups in the EP call roll-call votes and there is some suggestion that they may be biased towards the groups that call them (Carrubba and Gabel, 1999). Nevertheless, there is no evidence to suggest that roll-call votes are called disproportionately on particular policy issues, or by particular political groups or under particular legislative procedures. Thus, in the absence of a better proxy for members' preferences and given that NOMINATE is the standard method used in legislative studies for estimating ideal points of members of assemblies, I will work on the assumption that they are a reasonable, though imperfect, approximation of members' preferences.

The tests applied in this section address the question of whether or not the committees of the European Parliament are composed of preference outliers, examined at four different time points from July 1989 to June 1999. The EP is an institution in the process of defining itself and its powers have increased dramatically since the first direct elections. It is therefore important not to generalize from findings at one point in time to the entire history of the Parliament. It may very well be the case that parties did not care about the question of preference outliers when the Parliament was restricted in its legislative abilities but that the matter may now be a pressing concern. I therefore examine all of the committees separately at each time point, bearing in mind Fenno's (1973: 280) entreaty that 'committees differ from one another'. In the European Parliament there is a stark divide between legislative and non-legislative committees and this may be significant. The chamber may not care much about the representative nature of the non-legislative Fisheries

Committee, but it might be deeply concerned about having an Environment Committee that is not a true microcosm of Parliament.

My estimation includes all votes for the two committee periods 1989–92 and 1992–4 and a random sample of 1500 votes for the 1994–6 and 1997–9 committee terms. NOMINATE scores are estimated separately for each of the four committee terms under examination. Following Poole and Rosenthal (1991) for each of these legislative periods, I include every legislator who casts at least 25 votes. In addition, I excluded votes where less than 3% of those voting voted against the majority. Using first-dimension NOMINATE scores, I test whether committees are composed of outliers or whether they can be deemed representative of the chamber as a whole. The first dimension explains over 80% of total vote decisions during each time period. The average proportional reduction in error (APRE) for the first dimension is over 60% in each case; adding the second dimension reduces the errors by approximately 10% more.⁹ These percentages reflect similar findings in the US Congress. Poole and Rosenthal (1997) found that, in the first 100 Congresses, the average two-dimensional classifications were 85% and the average APRE was 0.56 for two dimensions.

Interpretation of the meaning of these dimensions is admittedly subjective. But, for each of the four committee terms, the first dimension very closely approximates the left–right dimension of national politics. Each of the political groups is in correct alignment with classic left–right expectations, with the European United Left and Green groupings on the far left and the Group for a Europe of Democracies and Diversities on the far right in 1999. This interpretation is consonant with recent analysis conducted by Hix (2001) and Hix et al. (2005). McElroy and Benoit (forthcoming) offer independent verification that the first dimension of competition in the European Parliament is a classic left–right one through analysis of an expert survey of political group positions.

W-NOMINATE scores are not directly comparable across legislatures, but this is not problematic here because the measures of central tendency in any given committee period are examined only relative to chamber medians and means at each time point. Formal models suggest that studies of committee representativeness should focus on the position of the *median* legislator when exploring issues of central tendency (Black, 1958). Others use the *mean* as the appropriate test (Krehbiel, 1991). The latter is more sensitive to outlying observations and thus increases the odds of finding outlying committees. I therefore use both means and medians to test whether or not the committees are outlying, since this analysis represents the first systematic look at this question in the EP and I am interested in finding any evidence to support the hypothesis of unrepresentative committees.

The standard method for testing for difference of means is the basic *t*-test. However, this method has its drawbacks because it relies on certain distributional assumptions, in particular that the data are normally distributed. To test for difference in medians, one can use a non-parametric method such as a Mann–Whitney test, but the power of this test is relatively low and it makes the additional assumption that the data are symmetric. In order to provide tests for outlying committees without relying on these strong distributional assumptions, I utilize the non-parametric Groseclose (1994) Monte Carlo technique, which makes use of actual distributions to examine to what degree a committee is more outlying than a randomly selected committee would be. Essentially, this method compares the distribution of actual committees with simulated committees drawn from the full chamber. I perform Monte Carlo simulations for each committee for each two-and-a-half-year committee term.

Using the list of members in each Parliament and their NOMINATE scores, I created 10,000 simulated committees of the precise size of the actual committee under consideration. For instance, to simulate the selection of the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) in 1989, 54 members are selected (without replacement) from the complete list of MEPs and the median and mean scores for this random committee are then calculated. This process is repeated 10,000 times, and the distribution of the means and medians from the randomly selected committees is compared with the mean and median of the actual PAC. From this distribution of 10,000 medians one can examine what percentage of random committees are as outlying as the PAC. Looking at the second column of Table 2, we can see that, of the simulated committees, a proportion of .277 were equally as outlying as the actual PAC, i.e. they had a median score that was equal to or greater than that of the PAC. With a standard threshold of .05 as our test statistic, we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the committee is randomly assigned. A similar test is conducted for means. The results are presented in column 3 in Table 2 and we see that .289 random committees had a mean as outlying as that of the PAC.

As can be seen easily from Table 2 and Table 3, the proportion of committees that are as outlying is rarely less than 5%. Looking at simulated medians, we see that in 1989 only the ‘neutral’ Budgetary Control Committee meets this criterion.

For the remaining three committee periods, the random hypothesis can be rejected only once – for the Social Affairs and Employment Committee in 1997–9. Looking at simulated means, we note that the null is rejected only once over the course of the four committee periods under examination, once again for the Budgetary Control Committee in 1992–4. The empirical evidence is hence overwhelmingly in favour of representative committees. There are

Table 2 Preference outliers 1989–94 based on NOMINATE scores

| <i>Committee</i> | <i>1989–92</i> | | | <i>1992–4</i> | | |
|---|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| | <i>Simulated median p</i> | <i>Simulated mean p</i> | <i>Committee size</i> | <i>Simulated median p</i> | <i>Simulated mean p</i> | <i>Committee size</i> |
| Political Affairs | .227 | .289 | 54 | .307 | .332 | 55 |
| Agriculture, Fisheries, Rural Development | .088 | .285 | 47 | .444 | .473 | 45 |
| Budgets | .211 | .284 | 32 | .186 | .284 | 28 |
| Economic & Monetary Affairs, Industrial Policy | .406 | .248 | 50 | .492 | .467 | 47 |
| Energy, Research & Technology | .095 | .167 | 32 | .390 | .427 | 30 |
| External Economic Relations | .454 | .275 | 27 | .433 | .320 | 24 |
| Legal Affairs & Citizens' Rights | .471 | .293 | 32 | .308 | .294 | 27 |
| Social Affairs & Employment | .363 | .139 | 41 | .112 | .357 | 37 |
| Regional Policy and Regional Planning | .106 | .062 | 34 | .442 | .488 | 34 |
| Transport and Tourism | .070 | .083 | 28 | .391 | .487 | 29 |
| Environment, Public Health & Consumer Protection | .183 | .324 | 52 | .479 | .327 | 48 |
| Youth, Culture, Education, the Media & Sport | .206 | .244 | 30 | .464 | .229 | 30 |
| Development & Cooperation | .474 | .259 | 43 | .180 | .283 | 37 |
| Budgetary Control | .010 | .136 | 28 | .128 | .045 | 22 |
| Institutional Affairs | .430 | .489 | 34 | .371 | .357 | 34 |
| Rules of Procedure & Verifications of Credentials and Immunities | .422 | .326 | 26 | .464 | .387 | 24 |
| Women's Rights | .386 | .326 | 33 | .234 | .160 | 28 |
| Petitions | .253 | .235 | 24 | .403 | .343 | 23 |
| Civil Liberties and Internal Affairs | | | | .356 | .499 | 28 |

Table 3 Preference Outliers 1994–9 based on NOMINATE scores

| <i>Committee</i> | <i>1994–6</i> | | | <i>1997–9</i> | | |
|---|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| | <i>Simulated median p</i> | <i>Simulated mean p</i> | <i>Committee size</i> | <i>Simulated median p</i> | <i>Simulated mean p</i> | <i>Committee size</i> |
| Foreign Affairs, Security and Defence Policy | .464 | .495 | 52 | .434 | .397 | 65 |
| Agriculture & Rural Development | .181 | .197 | 46 | .192 | .127 | 45 |
| Budgets | .461 | .376 | 34 | .362 | .384 | 40 |
| Economic & Monetary Affairs, Industrial Policy | .457 | .480 | 52 | .389 | .374 | 59 |
| Research, Technological Development and Energy | .345 | .269 | 28 | .399 | .435 | 33 |
| External Economic Relations | .278 | .333 | 25 | .233 | .303 | 23 |
| Legal Affairs & Citizens' Rights | .325 | .392 | 25 | .298 | .309 | 26 |
| Social Affairs & Employment | .459 | .430 | 42 | .015 | .111 | 47 |
| Regional Policy | .493 | .366 | 37 | .416 | .443 | 43 |
| Transport and Tourism | .400 | .389 | 35 | .456 | .387 | 40 |
| Environment, Public Health & Consumer Protection | .427 | .273 | 44 | .378 | .298 | 51 |
| Culture, Youth, Education & the Media | .297 | .439 | 36 | .260 | .369 | 39 |
| Development & Cooperation | .497 | .464 | 35 | .378 | .440 | 39 |
| Budgetary Control | .397 | .390 | 24 | .341 | .295 | 26 |
| Civil Liberties and Internal Affairs | .242 | .254 | 32 | .279 | .282 | 32 |
| Institutional Affairs | .420 | .445 | 39 | .397 | .261 | 37 |
| Rules of Procedure & Verifications of Credentials and Immunities | .373 | .309 | 23 | .331 | .374 | 25 |
| Fisheries | .413 | .374 | 22 | .434 | .366 | 25 |
| Women's Rights | .204 | .201 | 36 | .189 | .147 | 39 |
| Petitions | .467 | .396 | 26 | .488 | .424 | 31 |

Table 4 Preference outliers based on policy-specific measures

| <i>Committee</i> | <i>1989–92</i> | | | <i>1994–6</i> | | |
|--|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| | <i>Simulated median p</i> | <i>Simulated mean p</i> | <i>Committee size</i> | <i>Simulated median p</i> | <i>Simulated mean p</i> | <i>Committee size</i> |
| Environment, Public Health & Consumer Protection | .348 | .335 | 50 | .354 | .063 | 42 |
| Economic & Monetary Affairs, Industrial Policy | .345 | .251 | 46 | .337 | .226 | 44 |
| Agriculture & Rural Development | .283 | .283 | 46 | .281 | .119 | 39 |
| External Economic Relations | .450 | .351 | 24 | .157 | .247 | 22 |
| Social Affairs & Employment | .375 | .267 | 34 | .325 | .012 | 39 |

few, if any, systematic differences between committees and the Parliament as a whole in terms of the classic left–right dimension.

As a final test, setting the bar even higher for the representative committee hypothesis, I also examined whether the committees are outliers in terms of their own specific policy domains. For example, is the Environment Committee off-centre in terms of ‘green’ issues? Testing this hypothesis requires policy-specific ratings for each Member of Parliament. To obtain these, I have used a random sample of (for instance) environmental votes to arrive at ideal points for each member on an environmental policy dimension. Table 4 presents the results of Monte Carlo simulations on these data using the methods outlined in the previous section in five different policy domains: Environment, Public Health and Consumer Protection; Economic and Monetary Affairs, Industrial Policy; Agriculture and Rural Development; External Economic Relations; and Social Affairs and Employment.

As is clear from the table, there is little evidence for committees being policy outliers even within their own specific domains. With the exception of the Social Affairs and Employment Committee in 1994, not a single committee is outlying in terms of simulated committee distributions in either of the two time periods examined (1989–92 and 1994–96). The Social Affairs and Employment Committee is outlying in terms only of its mean and not of the standard measure of central tendency, the median. The results weigh quite heavily against the distributional theory expectation that committees should be composed of preference outliers.¹⁰

Discussion

In this article I have sought to offer a comparative angle on the committee outlier debate. The analysis found no evidence to suggest that committees in the European Parliament are unrepresentative of their parent chamber. In the vast majority of cases, committee assignments in the EP lead to committees that are largely comparable with the larger legislature. In partisan, national and ideological terms, there does not appear to be any systematic departure from the principle of proportionality in the assignment of committee positions in the European Parliament. This finding holds for both legislative and non-legislative committees and over time. In short, there is simply no evidence to suggest that there is any systematic bias in committee assignments in the EP. Despite conventional wisdom, the Environment Committee is no more left-wing or green than the Assembly taken as a whole.

Evidence for outlying committees is absent; the few cases found could easily have been produced by random error. Indeed, we would expect, in a

chamber with 20 committees, to reject the null erroneously at least once ($20 * 0.05 = 1$). It is not clear if this lack of outliers is the result of a random assignment process or the product of conscious behaviour on the part of party leaders. Nonetheless, the evidence is certainly consistent with a story of party leadership consciously making an effort to create representative committees. These findings are particularly interesting in light of the work of Kaeding (2004) and Hoyland (in this issue), which suggests that the allocation of actual reports within committees is not representative of the chamber as a whole.

The analysis of ideological representativeness has relied on NOMINATE scores estimated from roll-call votes, a procedure that is not free of shortcomings. The selectivity of roll-call votes in the EP, for instance, may mean that these votes do not portray the full spectrum of policy preferences or are called on strategically unrepresentative issues. In addition to the problems of errors in measurement, the use of roll-call votes may bias results towards the null (Hall and Grofman, 1990). To validate some of the findings, one possible avenue for future research is to find some alternative measures of off-centredness. Two that suggest themselves use data on amendments in plenary. First, does plenary accept amendments from the reporting committee at the first and second readings? If these are rejected, it would provide some indication that the committee opinion is not representative of the larger assembly. Secondly, how many amendments does the chamber add? For example, does plenary add a disproportionate number of amendments to reports coming from the Environment Committee? This might indicate that the Parliament was not satisfied with the final wording of the Environment report.

This first look at the representativeness of EP committees has left many important questions to be further explored. In particular, the role of political groups in the process of committee assignment needs to be examined in greater detail. Do political leaders consciously choose contingents that result in representative committees, or are representative committees a product of random assignment facilitated by the parliamentary rules and norms? Given the very high transfer rates (upwards of 30%) between committees from one committee term to the next, the question arises of whether this reflects choice on the part of individual MEPs or, rather, an opportunity by party leaders to change the composition of committees.

This analysis represents a first step in examining the committee system of the European Parliament, and there is great scope for future analysis. Noting these caveats, the results presented here suggest that the assignment process in the European Parliament is more consonant with the informational model of politics.

Notes

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- 1 In conversation with the author.
- 2 This number was temporarily reduced to 17 in the Fifth Parliament (1999–2004) but attempts by the Party of European Socialists to reduce the number of standing committees even further were not successful. There have been calls to expand the number of committees with each enlargement of the Parliament. The creation of subcommittees and temporary committees has somewhat alleviated the pressure for further enlargement of the system.
- 3 The Appendices to this article are to be found on the EUP webpage.
- 4 Of the respondents, 37% opted for committee chair as their first preference, compared with 27% opting for what would ostensibly seem to be the most prestigious parliamentary post, the presidency of the Parliament. Only 18% opted for leading their national delegation and 17% opted for leadership of their political group (Hix and Scully, 2000).
- 5 This period is not unrepresentative; similar results have been produced for the full period 1992–2004 but are not presented here for reasons of space. They are available from the author upon request.
- 6 Bowler and Farrell (1995: 240) argue that seniority is irrelevant. Nonetheless, there is evidence from interviews with senior party leaders that seniority is not irrelevant. High-profile committees such as Foreign Affairs and Legal Affairs have a much higher number of returning MEPs than do low-prestige committees such as Culture or Regional Policy.
- 7 Cox and McCubbins (1993) offer a third theory of committee composition, which predicts that the majority party controls the assignment of its party members to committees with ‘uniform externalities’. However, committees with targeted externalities may be unrepresentative. It is unclear which committees, if any, in the EP have targeted externalities and which have uniform and mixed externalities. Here, all I can say is that the party contingents are representative of their parent party on the committees examined for the PES and EPP.
- 8 The very first attempts to produce Interest Group scores for the EP took place only in 2004, when Friends of the Earth produced a scale deeming MEPs to be either for or against environment legislation on the basis of a sample of key votes.
- 9 The APRE is defined as follows:

$$\text{APRE} = \frac{\sum (\text{minority vote} - \text{NOMINATE classification errors})}{\sum \text{minority vote}}$$

- 10 Standard *t*-tests and the Mann–Whitney difference of medians test on the data revealed few outlying committees either. The results are available on request from the author.

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